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Advertisements

Basic elements

Advertisements as discourse must first be recognized as paid, nonpersonal communication forms used by identified sources through various media with persuasive intent. As "paid" communication forms, then, they are different from common variaties of publicity (e. g. a press release), or "public relations" (e. g. a news conference), which are often covered by the media without charge. By "nonpersonal" they are distinguished from forms of personal salesmanship occuring in business establishments or door—to—door. The advertiser is "identified", which again sets this form of persuasive communication apart from various types of promotion and publicity in the form of "news" or "feature" material often carried by the media but supplied by a particular source whose intent is often persuasive (e. g. a "consumer information" specialist on a TV talk show who in fact works for an appliance company). Advertisements are most commonly associated with the "mass media" of newspapers, magazines, cinema, television, and radio, although they frequently flourish in other forms such as billboards, posters, and direct mail as well. And, finally, advertisements are overwhelmingly used with persuasive intent. That is, the advertisers are striving to alter behavior and/or our levels of awareness, knowledge, attitutde and so on in a manner that would be beneficial to them.

Advertising today is a world-wide phenomenon, with the heaviest concentration in the United States. It is important at the outset to recognize that many advertisers use advertisements for many purposes with many different possible effects. For example, within a given country it is common to find what might be considered highly fanciful advertising for consumer goods such as toothpaste, detergents, or soft drinks, and highly technical messages dealing with construction equipment, medial supplies, or computer services. The advertisers themselves can include huge multinational firms, special interest groups, local shop keepers and individuals. Their intents can range from altering behavior to affecting the way people think about a particular social or economic position. The results of their efforts can range from enormously influential to a waste of the advertiser's money. It is not, then, a subject that lends itself to oversimplification.

The Forms of Advertising

A very basic sweep of advertising's many faces would reveal at least eight basic forms. They are:

— *Advertising by producers of consumer goods to reach individuals.* This is often called "general" or "national" advertising, because it involves advertising from a single company (the "producer" of the good or service) to an audience over a large geographic area — a region, or perhaps an entire country. Media used may be magazines, radio, television, newspapers, outdoor, cinema, direct mail, transit, etc. The purpose is generally to attempt to encourage preference for a particular brand. (An example would be a typical advertisement for Coca-Cola.)

— *Advertising by producers of consumers goods to reach retailers and wholesalers.* The same companies that attempt to reach individual consumers also often advertise to retailers to encourage them to stock the product that the retailers would then sell to individuals. This is often a very important form of advertising, frequently combined with personal selling, because the competition for retailer "shelf space" is quite strong. Media used would include direct mail and hihgly specialized "trade" magazines such as *Drug Topics*, *Supermarket News*, *Farm Supplier*, etc. (An example would be a Tylenol ad directed to supermarket managers.)

— *Advertising by producers of business goods and services to other business.* The makers of goods and services used by other businesses (e. g., fire extinguishers, machine tools, file cabinets, computer systems, basic chamicals, electronic components, etc.) advertise to them in an attempt to secure sales for their particualar brand. Thus, a glass producer may advertise to car manufacturers to use their glass in making the cars the companies sell, while a supplier of typewriters will advertise to businesses to attempt to secure purchase for the companies' *own* uses — *not* for resale. Media used could include direct mail, highly specialized magazines, and newsletters — e. g., *Hydraulics and Pneumatics*, *Air & Cosmos*, *Revista Aerea Latinoamerica*. (An example would be Caterpillar Tractor's advertising in a construction trade paper.)

— *Advertising by producers for "public relations" purposes to individuals, special interest groups, and their own employees.* This increasingly prevalent type of advertising is meant to influence key "publics" (e. g. government, the financial community, employees, etc.) on matters of concern to the firm. Consumer and business media are used. (An example would be Mobil Oil's advertising seeking to influence public opinion on a host of energy-related issues.)

— *Advertising by producers of consumer and/or business goods and services in international distribution.* Marketing today is increasingly of a multinational character. So firms distributing their products and services to countries other than their own increasingly utilize advertising to influence appropriate audiences. International giants such as Unilever, Phillips, General Motors, and Procter and Gamble advertise to consumer *and* business audiences around

the world. (An example would be a counter card advertising Pepsi–Cola in Russia.)

— *Advertising by retailers to individual consumers.* Retail advertising is among the oldest forms. It emphasizes patronage of a particular store and uses media that reach generally limited geographic areas. Unlike "general" advertising, the message is usually not "Buy this brand" but "Buy *here*." Often the appeal is one of price. (An example woulde be a "sale" advertisement run by a department store in a local newspaper.)

— *Advertising of individuals to other individuals.* Many of the newspapers and magazines around the world carry "classified" advertising, where individuals are attempting to persuade others to buy or trade. This is perhaps the closest modern form of advertising to the traditional "market" or "casbah" where goods and services were bought, sold, or traded between individuals. (An example would be an individual running a small classified advertisement to attempt to sell their bicycle.)

— *Advertising of governments, social institutions, and special interest groups.* This final classification can encompass everything from the Russian government attempting to encourage domestic margarine consumption, to an English labor union attempting to influence the government's position on their strike. In virtually every country this is a growing area for advertising, ranging from "public service" to far more controversial subjects involving abortion or national energy policy. (An example would be the advertising of Population Services International in an attempt to encourage family planning in Sri Lanka.)

Factors Explaining the Forms of Advertising

To begin to understand any given advertisement, then, one must first attempt to understand its purpose. It is clear that the intent of, say, an individual attempting to sell a refrigerator through a classified ad does not lend itself to easy comparsion with a multinational corporation attempting to secure brand preference for a snack food with a multimillion dollar budget. We can, then, begin to have some general understanding of advertisements by placing them in one of the eight basic forms just discussed. Each, as mentioned, has *general* purposes, media, and audiences in common.

But, clearly, all retailer advertisements are not alike, nor all messages from multinational firms, etc. In order to clarify still further, it is necessary to realize that any advertiser, from an individual to the loftiest corporate enterprise, confronts both non-controllable (external) and controllable (internal) factors in the potential use of advertising. It is with these conceptual tools, then, that we can begin to understand advertisements as a form of discourse with somewhat greater precision.

Non controllable (external) factors. The most obvious external factor is the socio-economic system in which the advertiser finds himself. Generally,

advertisements in their total range of forms and functions are found in countries with market economies. Here there is general reliance on individual initiative as a form of resource allocation, thus providing ample room for the self interests of sellers to manifest themselves in advertisements as well as other forms of business initiative. There is, of course, no totally "free" market in the classic *lassiez-faire* sense, but is it clear that, in spite of various regulations and guidelines, the advertiser in the United States has considerable more latitude in media choice, subject matter, and tone than a counterpart in Russia.

Even in countries with relatively similar economic systems, however, there are still often striking differences in the regulations of particular forms (e. g. whether advertising to children is permitted, the advertising of cigarettes, alcoholic beverages, etc.) and media (e. g. no advertising accepted in the broadcast media, or limited to particular time segments, etc.).

One is advised, then, to approach advertisements with some understanding of the expectations of advertising in that particular *culture*. These expectations are, of course, closely aligned with the more general "world view" of the country regarding such fundamental assumptions as the "rationality" of man, the relationship of the individual and the state, etc. Given different assumptions about these core beliefs, advertising's role can be perceived quite differently.

Advertisers are often quite powerless to affect many other factors that may strongly influence the opportunities for their successful use of advertising. The most obvious within a culture is the complexity of the individual. Potential receivers of a typical advertisement are themselves influenced by myriad external (e. g. the presence or absence of other people, the weather, the physical environment) and internal (past experiences, attitudes, the state of health) at any given moment, thus making the probability of successful communication at any given time chancy at best. Advertisers must, as we shall see, make certain assumptions about the particular combination of these factors when they prepare their advertisements. Given the host of potential influences on individual behavior in the absence of, or in addition to, advertising, then, this factor explains one of the most important characteristics of contemporary advertising — the uncertainty of its outcome.

Other non-controllable factors could include changes in the age of the population (e. g. a decline in the birth rate affects the "market" for baby clothes), occupational shifts (e. g. the vast increase in the percentage of working women assures a better reception of advertisements for time-saving products and services), and genereal social norms (e. g. the so-called "sexual revolution" in the United States has resulted in more explicit sexual tone in advertisements as well as more advertising in formerly taboo areas such as birth control products).

General economic conditions affect the opportunities for advertisements (e. g. in inflationary times individuals may tend to redefine "necessities" and "luxuries"), as do geographic factors (e. g. urban-suburban-rural population

shifts suggest changing life styles with corresponding interest or disinterest in certain classes of products and services).

Advances in technology also present and withdraw advertising opportunities, (e. g. the invention and virtually universal acceptance of television not only opened a new advertising medium, but drastically changed recreational patterns; the refinement of the computer "micro-processor" has made possible a host of video games, home computer systems, digital watches, pocket calculators and the like, while severely altering the market for conventional watches, adding machines, slide rules, etc.)

Note that none of the factors discussed here as external factors are readily controlled by the advertiser. Rather the opportunities (or limitations) of advertising certain kinds of products and services in certain kinds of ways using certain kinds of media are affected. Thus, to analyze any given advertisement, one needs to ask "What are the non-controllable factors that this message is attempting to respond to?"

Controllable (internal) factors, include such questions as: What will be produced? At what price? Where will it be distributed? How will it be promoted? Logically, the kinds of products and services that are offered are determined in part by the "external" factors just discussed. For example, as gasoline prices rise to more typical "world" levels, Americans are now being offered more and more gas-efficient cars. Soccer can readily be promoted in many countries of the world, whereas it is still somewhat difficult to "sell" in the United States. So-called "convenience" foods may be eagerly received in some countries, but in others may be considered wasteful and extra vagant.

Clearly, how a product or service is priced affects how advertising is used, if it is used at all. In some countries, "generic" brands use little or no advertising and rely on very low prices. In some cases advertising can be used to promote prices (e. g. in typical grocery store or discount store advertising), but in others (particularly with many consumer goods sold by manufactures), advertising is used to *avoid* price competition — to suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that the *brand* rather than the price should be the deciding factor (e. g. with many virtual parity products such as cigarettes, beers, soaps, etc., as well as generally regarded "status" products such as liquor, certain types of clothing, cosmetics, etc.).

Where a product or service is offered can, of course, affect the extent of advertising as well as its content. If a product is distributed "nationally," then certain types of media (e. g. network television) and certain types of appeals (e. g. somewhat more heterogeneous to span regional differences) are more likely to be used than with local distribution (e. g. with newspapers and more localized appeal).

Advertising is not, of course, the only form of promotion available to a firm or individual. Personal selling may be far more effective than advertising with many business or technical products and services (e. g. computer systems),

and some types of sales promotions (e. g. contests, "point-of-purchase" signs) may be used with (or instead of) advertising.

Thus, the choices that individuals or firms have open to them in a general attempt to respond to (and influence) non-controllable factors affect whether advertising will or will not play an important role. As we have seen, it may be one of the leading elements in the advertiser's "marketing mix" (e. g. a $50,000,000 effort to establish and maintain a cigarette brand), or be used largely as a supplement to other forms of promotional activity (e. g. a firm offering basic chemicals advertises to purchasing agents only to acquire name recognition to make the personal salesman's task easier), if it is used at all.

Finally, in the most narrow focus within the contexts already discussed, any advertisement can be considered a "symbol package," reflecting assumptions about the likely motivational elements on the part of the potential "market."

The Advertisements as a "Symbol Package"

Human communication is on a conceptual level. We are able to transmit "pictures in the heads" through the use of verbal (predominantly words) and non-verbal (music, art, photography, graphics, gestures, etc.) symbols. Unlike our normal person-to-person symbolic communication forms, advertisements:

— Are overwhelmingly persuasive in intent. For example, the use of information by an advertiser can still be considered a means to the end of persuasion; hence the classic division of ads into informative (presumably good) and persuasive (presumably bad) is both simplistic and wrong.

— Lack immediate feedback. The feedback from most advertisements is inferred, usually in the form of some action taken on the part of the "target" audience. For example, if sales go up, the advertising campaign is seen to be "working." As we have seen, however, the abundance of potential influences on behavior other than (or in addition to) advertising, makes such an assumption more an act of faith than a statement of fact.

— Are, as Boorstin (1974) and others have noted, characterized by repetition. Much manufacturer advertising tends to involve the repetition of the same message (often *ad nauseum* in the broadcast media). Although retail advertising frequently changes daily, repetition — and potential irritation — can be said to be characteristic of many advertising messages.

— Commonly involve hyperbole, "puffing," exaggeration, fancy. Part of this can be explained by the *caveat emptor* character of the market system. Perhaps of greater interest is the idea expressed by Levitt (1971) that advertising serves as a form of "alleviating imagery" for many of us, offering a world far more interesting, glamorous, sinful, alluring, clean, better ordered, and exciting than that we find around us. Thus, we may be seen to welcome the blandishments of advertisements at the same time that we may be annoyed by their repetition, lack of "taste" and the like.

Given these characteristics for virtually all advertising messages, the particular qualities of any one can be further analyzed by considering the advertiser's presumed *strategy* and *technique* .

Strategy, basically involves *what* is to be said. This is a decision that can be seen as an end product of many of the non-controllable and controllable factors discussed earlier. For example:

— A manufacturer of a video disc player attempts to "position" it as an alternative to video tape recorder/players as well as other brands.

— A local restaurant attempts to establish itself as a low-cost alternative to "fast food" franchises.

— A manufacturer of drill bits for oil exploration attempts to communicate the field-tested durability of his product.

— An association of sugar producers attempts to establish the case for sugar as a nutritious part of normal diets.

Note that in many of the examples above the same strategic goals could be implemented with forms other than (or in addition to) advertising. The video disc *could,* for example, be promoted through in-store demonstrations, the drill bit through a sales force, etc.

Technique, then, involves *how* to say it. As suggested above, a careful reading of non-controllable factors and appropriate allocation of international (controllable) resources often makes it reasonably clear to the advertiser *what* is to be said, based on a deminishing number of options.

By contrast, however, the advertiser faces an almost infinitive number of choices among the verbal and non verbal symbols to implement the advertising strategy. To use the examples above:

— The video disc manufacturer could choose to be extremely informative, with heavy reliance on words and, perhaps, diagrams. He could also elect to emphasize the end product — i. e. the program *on* the video disc — with emphasis on arresting scenes from familiar movies. He could choose humor; or an appeal to self-fulfillment; or an invitation to peer-envy through being on the cutting edge of the new video technologies.

— The supplier of drill bits could use action photography of the bit in action supplemented by test data. He could also choose to have the data dominate, with little or no illustrative support, or gather "case history" information and present his message in first-person format.

— The sugar producers could use clinical evidence, the testimony of celebrities, or credible nutritional sources. They could attempt to debunk "sugar myths" through cartoon humor, animation, or jingles. Their tone could be light — or deadly earnest, even angry.

— The restauranteur could use man-in-the-booth interviews, reproduce his entire menu, feature "specials," concentrate on "atmosphere," the competency of waitresses, or the availability of parking. All of these, in turn, could be implemented through words, pictures, music, sound effects, graphics, or some combination.

With all of this, the advertiser faces the very real possibility of simply being ignored. Or having the symbol package interpreted in ways other than those intended. And, almost always, he will never be entirely sure of the advertisement's contribution to the outcome.

Now, given the complexity of the advertisement, its context and form, it is easy to see how its analysis in terms of communication discourse could follow many avenues. For example, Goffman (1979) and Brown (1981) offer insights into advertisers use of stereotypes in terms of sexual roles and family life, while Rank (1982) has worked with the National Council of Teachers of English Committee on Public Dublespeak to develop tools for "analyzing commercial and political propaganda," etc.

Within this prolific array, let me focus briefly on my interpretation of two propositions from the social-psychological (Rotzoll, 1980) theories of Muzafer and Carolyn Sherif (1969).

Structured stimulus situations set limits to alternatives in psychological patterning. This proposition — and the next — examine the potential influence of a major *external* (to the individual) variable — the degree of "structure" in the advertisement. A "structured" stimulus situation may be defined as one that is clear cut, has a definite pattern, is unambiguous, and so on. As a simple example, a drawing of a square is relatively "structured" compared to an ink blot. The simulus situation of typical Protestant or Catholic church service is relatively structured while that of (say) the Quakers and many fundamentalist sects is not.

Now, the propositions suggests that whenever the external stimulus situation is relatively structured, the influence of internal factors (such as our ability to "see what we want to see") will be lessened.

The implications for advertising response are significant. It would seem to follow from the proposition that whenever an ad is highly structured, the opportunity for us to interpret it via our internal factors is limited. Now, an advertising message that is relatively structured would be one that would have a clear, unambiguous message. A structured ad would possibly feature explicitly stated product/service characteristics and expectations. It would make clear what the message is and what action we're supposed to take as a result. Given this type of message then, the possibility of distortion via internal factors is presumably minimized.

The advantages of such an approach are fairly obvious. The small newspaper ad that headlines, "Hemorrhoid Sufferers" is likely to attract precisely who is sought. The "trade" ad that cries "Now, A Profitable Line of Paperbacks for the Small Retailer," signals a particular target. We are all familiar with the so-called "slice of life" approach to broadcast commercials. These are simply mini-dramas occuring in the supermarket, kitchen, garage, picnic grove, or wherever. Typically, the problem is presented, the product introduced, and the problem resolved. There is a little time for character development. These are also frequently the types of advertisements most

subject to ridicule. There's little guesswork about "What's going on," or nagging questions about what we are supposed to learn from the message.

There are, of course, other responses to the highly structured message that are *not* so desirable. The straightforward message may discourage us from misinterpreting it but it may also limit its appeal. If we are not concerned primarily with the problems of overly waxy floors, the need for perfection in our morning coffee, or the assurance of masculinity in our cigarette, the highly structured message may be screened out. By its very nature it makes it clear from the outset what it's about and we may simply not be interested. If the message proclaims, "Wonder Bread Builds Strong Bodies 12 Ways," and we are *not* concerned with the nutritional qualities of bread (as compared with, say, its taste), then we may simply ignore the message. Thus, the advertiser utilizing a relatively structured message form runs the risk of limiting his potential audience. The potential customer *recognizes* the message *due* to its structure, but decides "Tha's not for me" because there is so little room for injecting his or own product criteria experiences into the picture.

With a highly structured ad message, then, alternatives in psychological patterning (other than those intended by the advertiser) are limited, simply because the message imposes its clear-cut pattern on the stimulus situation. Whether or not we *respond* to that pattern (clear though it may be) is determined in large part by whether the advertiser's patterning of reality matches our own.

In unstructured stimulus situations, alternatives in psychological patterning are increased. Given the psychological tendency toward patterning of experience, and given an external stimulus situation that is *not* clearly structured, it follows that the patterning will tend to be added by *internal* factors. Thus, many reports on unidentified flying objects (U. F. O. s) have described them as "saucer" or "cigar" shaped, apparently as a result of imposing a *known* pattern (structure) on a subject (the flying object) which, to put it mildly, is unstructured, ambiguous, fluid, lacking clear definition, etc. The individual must *bring* the "pattern" to the ink blot, since it has no structure to make a pattern clear. Here, then, the interpretations tend to be subjective, varying from individual to individual. Exposed to Rembrandt's "Man in a Gold Helmet," we all see much the same thing. Exposed to a Picasso, we may *each* have different ideas of the appropriate "pattern."

It follows, then, that relatively "unstructured" advertisements may be interpreted in different ways by different people. The "Un-Cola" campaign for 7-up, for example, required the individuals to "make sense" of many of the messages, to interject their own order, as did the extraordinarily expensive Levis "trademark" effort. Many of the so-called "soft-sell" approaches used by perfumes, cosmetics, beers, liquors — and even some politicians — are deliberately designed to be ambiguous enough so that the individual can impose their own (hopefully positive) structure on the situation.

The advantages and disadvantages of such an approach should be evident. Basically, by allowing room for many interpretations, the advertiser increases the possibility of attracting a wide range of customers, each of whom could potentially find something in the message that could be patterned from their own experiences, etc. Also, to the extent that the effort of patterning is that of the individual, there is potentially a greater sense of achievement, "involvement" if you will, in having "closed" the message structure to some meaningful whole.

The potential pitfalls in response are due in part precisely to the "effort" required. Unless the reward for taking time to induce a pattern seems reasonable, the ad may simply be ignored. The mental question, "What's going on here?" may simply be answered, "Who cares?" Of course, if the *individual* supplies a pattern, it may *not* be the interpretation the advertiser wishes. Misinterpretation of advertising messages has been the downfall of many expensive advertising efforts.

Thus, the response to advertising messages may be influenced by the degree of structure of the advertising message. When the message is relatively structured, the "pattern" is already imposed and the chances for individual interpretation and patterning are diminished. This is the advertising approach frequently associated with the so-called "hard-sell" school. In contrast, as the structure of the advertising message loosens, the patterning is more likely to be supplied by the individual in line with previous experiences, attitudes, and so on. Often interpreted as "soft-sell" this message approach implies a frame-of-reference with internal factors intended to fill in the gaps intentionally or unintentionally left in the message structure.

Two Examples

We are advised, then, to approach individual advertisements with these questions:

— Are we certain this is advertising rather than, say, publicity, public relations, promotion, etc.?

— Which of the eight basic forms presented does it seem to represent?

— What uncontrollable (external) factors does it seem to be responding to, or attempting to change?

— What role is advertising likely to be playing in relation to the controllable (internal) factors that the advertiser can manipulate?

— What has the advertiser apparently attempted to accomplish with his advertising? What is his apparent strategy?

— How has he chosen to implement that strategy in his "symbol package?" Based on what apparent assumptions about the motivation of his potential audience?

— Did he choose a predominately structured or unstructured symbol package?

Example 1: An advertisement for an office computer system.

— This is clearly an advertisement — identified, appearing in paid space in a business magazine, etc.
— This can be classified as advertising of producers of business goods and services to other businesses.
— The advertisement is a reflection of changes in technology that make the use of computers for even small businesses possible if not mandatory.
— The advertisement is obviously not attempting to "close the sale," but rather impart enough information to generate inquiries which will then be followed up by personal salespeople.
— The apparent strategy of the message is to position the computer as ideal for small businesses.
— The techniques involve the use of a case history, including a toll-free number to facilitate inquiries. The advertiser is assuming his audience to be information-sensitive, thus providing an advertisement heavy on facts.
— The advertiser uses a structured message form, leaving little room for reader misinterpretation. This was apparently based on assumptions about the informations needs of the audience — i. e. they *need* facts in this still evolving (and confusing) office computer milieu.

Example 2: An advertisement for "fashion" dungarees.

— It is clearly an advertisement, appearing in paid time on television, with the manufacturer identified.
— It is an example of advertising by producers of consumer goods to individuals.
— It is clearly a response to the cultural drift toward the acceptance of "casual" clothing for all dress occasions.
— It reflects the predominate role of advertising in the "marketing mix" — the advertisement is considered sufficient to stimulate brand preference and "close the sale."
— The apparent strategy is to position the jeans as the height of sensual fashion — clothing that will cause the wearer to be noticed.
— the technique involves provocative "soft rock" music, "new wave" graphics, with quick cuts meant to deliver an overall mood. This assumes the audience is likely to buy the brand for impression, style, "feel," rather than, say, durability. Thus impression is of greater concern than information.
— The advertisement is predominately unstructured, assuming that the ego-involved viewer will make their own interpretation of the pieces and essentially "custom fit" the message to their particular perception of fashion and self.

Advertisements as a form of discourse. Beware of oversimplifications of often highly complex artifacts.

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